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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000746

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: DAS CARPENTER DISCUSSES REFORM WITH POLITICAL LEADERS

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Carpenter met with four political society leaders May 10 to discuss Bahrain's reform process. The leaders -- two from the boycotting opposition and two MPs -- acknowledged that Bahrain needs further democratic reform but disagreed on the impact of the current reforms and the preferred pace for future developments. The meeting sparked some commentary in the local press, particularly in one pro-Baathist newspaper, with some columnists wondering if it may have been an intervention in Bahrain's internal affairs. Representatives of two political societies publicly defended the meeting and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs inquired of the Ambassador about the nature of the meeting.

Four leaders express their views

2. (C) Four political society leaders met with NEA DAS Scott Carpenter May 10 to share their views on Bahrain's reform process. The leaders -- Ibrahim Sharif and Mohammed Jameel Al Jamry from the boycotting opposition and MPs Abdulnabi Salman and Dr. Salah Ali from parliament -- concurred that there is room for more reform, but disagreed on the current status of reforms and the pace for future developments. All except Dr. Salah believed "real dialogue" between the government and the opposition was necessary if compromise and progress were to be achieved. Carpenter told the participants that the U.S. has singled out Bahrain for praise, but expects consistent progress in the democratization process.

National Democratic Action Society

3. (C) National Democratic Action Society (NDAS) President Ibrahim Sharif explained that he and others in the boycotting opposition refer all of their concerns directly to the King because they consider the parliament to be powerless. The King could decrease sectarian tensions by altering electoral districts, which he claimed currently give an unfair advantage to Sunni voters. He said that the opposition is not asking to return to the 1973 constitution, but he referred to it at least a dozen times. Sharif warned that economic instability in Bahrain will grow as oil and gas revenues decrease, and this could easily lead to political instability if the GOB and the opposition are not on good terms. NDAS, recognizing that the opposition could have a louder voice if it were in parliament, will embark on a "soul searching process" at the end of the year to decide if it should participate in the 2006 elections. Sharif made a plea for "outside pressure" on the government to engage with the opposition. Without it, he asserted, the political environment would fail to evolve and could deteriorate.

Al Wifaq

4. (C) Mohammed Jameel Al Jamry, a board member of leading Shi'a opposition group Al Wifaq, said the opposition has done a lot to stabilize the country by calming people down and channeling people's frustrations into peaceful activity. Al Wifaq's number one priority is gaining constitutional amendments that are significant enough to justify its participation in the 2006 elections. Unfortunately, he explained, the GOB refuses to meet with the opposition or renew a dialogue on issues of concern. Al Jamry rejected the idea that Al Wifaq has a sectarian agenda, emphasizing that constitutional reforms would benefit all Bahrainis.

Democratic bloc MP

15. (C) Democratic bloc MP Abdulnabi Salman said he did not feel that the GOB is committed to reform. If the GOB were truly interested in full participation in the 2006 parliamentary elections, it would engage in a dialogue with the opposition and compromise on issues such as constitutional reform and the election law. Instead, the GOB is hassling oppositionists and missing opportunities to build trust. Salman hoped that the international community would support genuine reform in Bahrain. While acknowledging that the parliament is not as strong as it could be, he rejected the notion that it is powerless. In the past three years, MPs have pressured the government on a number of key issues including corruption, the constitution, and the need for political parties.

Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood) MP

16. (C) President of the Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood) bloc in parliament Dr. Salah Ali urged the oppositionists to join the system. He commented that society is divided now because some people do not recognize that reform is a process and that realistically a society and government cannot change overnight. It is true that there are many restrictions on parliament, but it has been effective in instigating a cabinet reshuffle and shifting power away from the Prime Minister. Bahrain is more free than most countries in the region. Pressure for change should come from inside Bahrain, and not foreign countries.

Reactions in the Press

17. (C) Akhbar Al Khaleej, a daily newspaper with a wide Sunni readership, printed an article May 12 on Carpenter's meeting with the society leaders. The article noted some of the issues discussed in the meeting and questioned why the GOB allowed such a meeting to take place, especially after its criticism of the British ambassador's meeting with the opposition in October 2004. Al Wasat, an independent newspaper with a mostly Shi'a readership, published similar comments from the president of the Islamic Action Society, a small boycotting group. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Assistant Undersecretary for Coordination and Follow Up Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa asked the Ambassador about the meeting. The Ambassador explained that Carpenter met with leaders who represented a variety of view points, as he did when visiting any country. Sheikh Abdul Aziz seemed satisfied with that information.

18. (C) Akhbar Al Khaleej also published two columns condemning Al Minbar for participating in what it called a closed meeting with a U.S. official. Al Minbar President Salah Ali responded publicly saying that the meeting was not secret and affirmed that Al Minbar is open to dialogue with

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everyone but refuses foreign pressure or intervention. Al Asala (Salafi) bloc MP Adel Al Moawda told the press that such meetings are acceptable as long as the participants' intentions are good.

19. (C) Comment: Carpenter's meeting again highlighted the challenges facing the GOB as it seeks to introduce greater political reform. Achieving opposition participation in the process is critical to securing broad-based support for overall reforms, but this will require dialogue and compromise on both sides. The opposition will have to accept the constitution as the legal framework governing the Kingdom, and the GOB will have to accept the idea that if social tension is to ease, some electoral reform, however modest, needs to take place.

110. (U) DAS Carpenter cleared this cable.
MONROE